

Review of Stuart Macwilliam, *Queer Theory and the Prophetic Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*. BibleWorld. Sheffield: Equinox Press, 2011.

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Queer Theory and the Prophetic Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible critiques the supposed heteronormativity of Yahweh's metaphorical marriage to Israel in Jeremiah 2-3, Hosea 1-3 and Ezekiel 16 and 23. This metaphorical marriage is frequently held up as a religious model or else criticised as divinely sanctioned misogyny, and Stuart Macwilliam attempts to respond to these idiosyncratic readings by using a collection of literary, linguistic, critical and autobiographical tools—as well as a heavily thumbed copy of *Gay Times* (circa 2004, of which more in a moment).

The book consists of three sections: I. Methodological Foundations; II. Queer and Metaphor, which reads the three texts for traces of heteronormative instability; and III. Queer and Camp, which explores the methodological potential of camp for Biblical Studies, and Ezekiel 23 in particular.

Methodologically, the book draws from Judith Butler's writings on gender and biological sex as performative practices. Crucially, though, Macwilliam takes neither Butler nor the queer theories that have been derived from her work at face value. He adroitly explores the ways in which certain strands of Queer Theory have emerged as a result of misapprehensions of Butler's work, and directly addresses the uncertainties that surround Butlerian "identity." Noting the activist leanings of most queer readers—people who want to *do* something with these ideas—he faces the obscurity surrounding the political implications of Butler's ideas head-on. What would queer interactions with biblical texts look like in practice, he wonders, how would queer encounters with the marriage metaphor relate to the existing body of work on the subject? The text is a response to these kinds of questions.

After a chapter-length discussion demonstrating that the prophets' intended audiences were in all likelihood men, the main body of the book is given over to close readings of Jeremiah 2-3, Hosea 1-3 and Ezekiel 16 and 23 that foreground the texts' own inability to maintain strict heteronormative binaries. So, in reading Jeremiah, Macwilliam focuses on the fact that the text does not make a "neatly consistent distinction ... between female Jerusalem with her sexual sins and male Israel and his socio-political apostasy" (p. 91), highlighting the ways in which the text thus imagines men to be Yahweh's sinful consort. Macwilliam also takes issue with the mainstream feminist readings of the marriage metaphor that interpret it as an intrinsically misogynistic trope on the basis that it a) equates femininity with sexual immorality and b) defends husbandly violence as divinely sanctioned. While Macwilliam is careful not to excuse the obvious violence displayed by Yahweh against his "wife," he points out that the marriage metaphor in Jeremiah does not consist only of two acts—blissful nuptials followed by wanton female unfaithfulness—but points to a grand *dénouement* too, a promised "Third Act" in which (male) Israelites are forgiven and live in cosmic queer harmony with their divine husband.

This Third Act of the marriage metaphor returns with gusto in Macwilliam's analysis of Hosea. The treatment of Hosea's marriage metaphor is made more complex because of the "parallel" marriage of Hosea and Gomer. Rather than making gender roles in God/Israel's "marriage" clearer, as one might expect, Hosea's marriage rather exacerbates the gendered blur. There is no straightforward equivalency that can be drawn between the two relationships, Macwilliam argues; these two marriages share only a succession of themes.

The queering of Ezekiel, in contrast, is done in two parts. The first argues that the confused pronominal gender suffixes in Ezekiel 16 and 23—the so called *m[ale] for f[emale]* forms—are neither arbitrarily placed in the text, nor to be overlooked in a reading. The *m* for *f* forms intentionally bring the masculine referent into play to undermine boundaries between male/female in the text. The second reading of Ezekiel riffs off the methodological potential of “camp.”

This camp reading is where the volume really comes into its own. Pulling together an impressive array of discussions on the politics, social functionality, and philosophical potential of camp as well as camp’s relationship with gender and ideas about effeminacy, Macwilliam figures camp as a socially determined construct, fuelled by the handholding of incongruous states and subjects (high/low, genuine/fake, public/private). Camp cannot be defined, he says, since this would represent a universalising move that camp’s own vicissitudes could not possibly maintain. Camp resides not in the feather boa or the glitter-ball but in the onlooker, and camp is therefore to be linked to Butler’s notions of gender performativity and, indeed, to the processes of generating textual meaning through reading.

This understanding of camp is then deployed to read Ezekiel. Using a back copy of *Gay Times*—and its very promising collection of contact advertisements in particular—as an ingenious intertext, Macwilliam explores the modern (camp) preoccupation with male endowment and ejaculate as symbols of sexual prowess. Inserting these ideas back into Ezekiel 23:11-21, Macwilliam argues that these verses are outrageous, campily exaggerated ideas in sedate clothing, oracles preoccupied not with sexual demur but with gargantuan dicks and rivers of semen. Who, asks Macwilliam, is really the sex addict here: Oholibah or the vocal, well-informed Yahweh? The marriage metaphor is a very male version of female desire, he points out, and while Oholibah might be bad drag, she makes for very good camp. For Macwilliam she is an early Mae West.

If the discussion in the latter part of the book is all leather trousers and sequins, the earlier portions are clearly more corduroy. But to mistake these earlier sections for straightforward staid technical quests for textual meaning would be to do Macwilliam and the volume a great disservice. By giving the book two distinct styles—and *these* two styles in particular—Macwilliam quite deliciously queers his own methodological approach. Like Ezekiel 23:11-21, the early bits of Macwilliam’s book are outrageous ideas in sober guise. And by comparing the performativity of camp to *writing and reading* Macwilliam is able to camp up the rôle of writer and reader too—both his and ours. The implications of queer and camp not just for *these* strange marital-biblical texts but for Text in general—for the human project of producing and consuming patterned ink—sit tantalizingly below the surface of the whole analysis, then. This, I think, is a major contribution of the book and should not be overlooked.

The questions one could pose to the volume are perhaps all too predictable. Macwilliam’s insightful treatment of Butler and her (queer) readers doesn’t take into account the more recent work that has sought to challenge Butler’s politics of performative gender and the nature/culture division (I am thinking particularly of Vicki Kirby’s *Telling Flesh*). I would be interested to see what Macwilliam would make of these recent discussions and what effect, if any, they would have on his approach to the issue. Furthermore, while Macwilliam does a great deal to queer heteronormative marriage by showing the interpenetration of male and female categories in the biblical text, he seems sometimes to ignore the constructedness of the categories themselves. By showing men to be imagined as women and vice versa, is the idea of basic gendered categorisation subverted or enshrined in the discussion?

These, of course, are really just quibbles. The volume is tightly argued and well reasoned, and though some discussions are quite technical and dense—Macwilliam says himself that ch.7 is hard to read!—the book is penned with both humour what can only be described as mischievous cheek. (At one point, in criticising a particular feminist’s reading of Jeremiah, Macwilliam compares her work to

a badly executed recipe, which in a thesis about gender, well-worn sexual tropes, and metaphor is surely designed to raise both smiles and eyebrows). In that sense the book could be described—methodologically, ideologically, and stylistically—as roguish. And quite delightfully so.

REFERENCES

Kirby, V. 1997. *Telling flesh: The substance of the corporeal*. London: Routledge.



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